

Soblen Dies, Ending Battle To Escape Spy Life Term

LONDON, Sept. 11 (AP).—Fugitive spy Robert A. Soblen died in a London hospital today and escaped the life sentence that awaited him in a United States Federal prison for wartime espionage for the Soviet Union.

Soblen, 61, died in Hillingdon Hospital, where he had lain unconscious since last Thursday. He had taken an overdose of barbiturates just before he was removed from Brixton Prison for deportation to the United States.

Dr. Cyril Barnes, who was in charge of Soblen's treatment, told newsmen Soblen's death was due not to the drugs he had taken but rather to "exhaustion following convulsions and damage to the brain, presumably caused by hemorrhage."

Dr. Barnes explained that Soblen had taken a quick-acting barbiturate and "it had been eliminated from the body chemically 24 hours before death."

Wife Treated for Shock

Dr. Barnes said Soblen's wife, Dr. Dina Soblen, a psychiatrist like her husband, was at his bedside when he died. She flew to London and had been at the hospital with him since Friday.

"Just before 10 a.m. (13 a.m. EDT), there was a severe turn for the worse. I asked that Mrs. Soblen should be kept in the room with her husband as far as possible. She was with him at the end.

"Death did not occur suddenly, but came as his strength gradually failed."

Later Soblen's wife was admitted to the hospital as a patient. A spokesman said she was being treated for shock.

The lymphatic leukemia which Soblen claimed was killing him was one factor in his case, Dr. Barnes said, but "if the overdose had not happened, Dr. Soblen might have lived for some years." Leukemia is cancer of the blood.

Due to Exhaustion

The death was due to exhaustion following convulsions, after hemorrhage "which may have been related to the leukemia," Dr. Barnes said.

"The leukemia was in a very advanced stage. He had



Dr. Robert Soblen after his arrest in 1960.
—AP Wirephoto.

had the disease for three years. It was one of those which was running a slow course. The treatment he had had elsewhere in the past had been very effective in keeping the disease under control."

Scotland Yard homicide detectives were called in to track down the person who smuggled the lethal drug to Soblen. Officials at Brixton Prison hospital, where Soblen was held for two months, established that it was not stocked at the hospital.

No official explanation was given for the assignment of homicide men, but one source suggested a murder charge might be filed under the suicide act, which deals with criminal liability for complicity in another's death.

The Daily Herald speculated

"mugged the king to death to prevent him from talking further, even though he had insisted ever since his arrest that he was innocent.

A spokesman for the coroner's office said an inquest will open at 10 a.m. Thursday at the town hall in suburban Ealing.

"It will be the opening only," he emphasized.

In British inquests, this usually means that the first session is confined to bare details of the death under scrutiny, and that most of the evidence is introduced at a later date, following a recess.

Dr. Barnett Stross, a Laborite House of Commons member who supported Dr. Soblen's petition to the Home Secretary for freedom, told newsmen he believed the spy took the drugs in a genuine desire to die. Soblen's lawyers have said he just wanted to ease his plane flight back to New York.

"It seems to me that as a medical man he knew what he was doing," said Dr. Stross. "This was really an attempt to kill himself. This time obviously he had made up his mind he would rather die than go back to America."

10-Week Battle Over

The death of the New York psychiatrist ended a 10-week battle to escape deportation to the United States, where he was under life sentence as a wartime spy for the Soviet Union.

Soblen took an overdose of barbiturates apparently just before he was put in an ambulance last Thursday to be taken to a plane for the United States.

En route to London airport he lapsed into unconsciousness in the ambulance. At the airport he was transferred to another ambulance and rushed to nearby Hillingdon Hospital.

He never regained consciousness, and on Saturday he developed convulsions which persisted. His doctors said this was evidence of brain damage, apparently resulting from a shortage of oxygen. The doctors explained the overdose of barbiturates reduced the supply of oxygen to the brain and probably caused a brain hemorrhage.

Post-Mortem Scheduled

Hospital authorities said the body would be taken to nearby Kingston Lane Mortuary and a postmortem would be held later today.

Soblen was a physician afflicted with leukemia; a naturalized American convicted of biting the hand that gave him shelter; a Communist who ad-

mitted support of the left wing in the battles throughout World War II.

He denied vehemently that he ever engaged in espionage, "or anything remotely connected with it."

But he was convicted by a New York Federal district court July 13, 1961, of turning over secret data to Soviet agents over a span of two decades, including wartime information from the New York headquarters of the Office of Strategic Services. He was sentenced to life in prison, though the penalty might have been death.

American appeals judges and the United States Supreme Court considered the proof ironclad. Soblen was denied a new trial and the Supreme Court refused to review his case.

Spurned by Israel

That was the background of Soblen's flight last June 25 to Israel where, as a Jew, he vainly claimed the right to a haven under the Israeli Law of Return. Israel arrested him for entering with false documents—the Canadian passport of a dead brother—and expelled him.

Soblen was born November 7, 1900, into the numerous and wealthy Sobelvic family of Lithuania, a little Baltic state which was then a part of Czarist Russia but had 22 years of freedom between world wars.

Soblen and his younger brother, Jack, joined the Communist Party in 1919 while at school in Germany. The trial court was told that Soblen was so intense a party member that he went to Moscow in 1925 and became a Soviet citizen.

When the Soviet Union took over Lithuania at the beginning of World War II the Sobelvic family lost all its properties. Soviet authorities permitted the family to emigrate to America.

Some 15 family members, including Jack and Robert, landed in the United States October 20, 1941. They spread out to New York, Boston and Montreal.

Robert assumed the name Soblen. Jack used Soble. A third brother, Heras, continued using the family name until his death in Canada.

Soblen had studied medicine in Berlin and Bern and in 1944 opened a psychiatric practice in New York City. He later became the supervising psychiatrist at the Rockland State Hospital in Orangeburg, N. Y., and was a member, with about

20 other doctors of the Circle Manhattan Medical Group.

Soblen's wife, Dina, also is a psychiatrist. She later joined the Rockland Hospital staff. They have one child, Mrs. Jan Stutman of Nyack, N. Y., who is married to a physician.

Soblen and his brother Jack were naturalized in 1947.

Ten years later, Jack ran into trouble with the law.

He was arrested as the head of a Soviet spy ring, quickly pleaded guilty and was sentenced to seven years in a Federal prison.

Brother Star Witness

With a history of mental illness that included swallowing of nuts and bolts in a suicide attempt, Jack was a star witness for the United States Government at the four-week trial of his brother in 1961.

Swallowing pills to kill pain of the blood disease lymphatic leukemia, Soblen heard Jack tell this story:

The family was permitted to leave Lithuania under an arrangement with Lavrenti Beria, then chief of the Soviet secret police, that Jack and Robert would engage in espionage activities in the United States.

The others of the family, non-Communists, were sent along as coverups. The two brothers launched separate spy rings in 1941. Jack's group was intimately connected with Soviet embassies in many world capitals.

A confessed undercover agent, Mrs. Johanna Beker, testified she obtained information from OSS files and passed it on to Soblen at cloak-and-dagger meetings in New York's Central Park.

Soblen denied everything and asked frequently for recesses on grounds of his illness, which physicians told the court would kill him within a year.

Wife Pledged Savings

In sentencing Soblen August 7, 1961, to life, United States District Court Judge William B. Herlands said he was a potential mass murderer and a spy "no matter what his health may be." Soblen collapsed.

He was freed on \$100,000 bail pending appeals.

Mrs. Soblen pledged her life savings and her pension to raise \$40,000 and two wealthy New Yorkers loaned her the remaining \$60,000, saying they wanted to further civil liberties.

Soblen jumped the bail to flee to Israel via an Air France airliner after the United States Supreme Court turned down his appeal for review. Soblen's bail was declared forfeited in New York Court.

He was arrested in Tel Aviv June 28. Expelled aboard a New York-bound Israeli El Al airliner July 1, Soblen slashed a wrist and his abdomen with a pocket knife from his dressing tray to win a landing in London.

There, with the help of defense attorneys paid by British government funds, he staged a 10-week legal battle to avoid return to the United States.

Turned down by British courts, he appealed vainly to Home Secretary Henry Brooke to cancel a deportation order.

Left-Wing Supporter

"I readily admit that up to the age of 45 I was a supporter of the left wing in politics, but at no time did I engage in espionage or anything remotely connected with it," he told Mr. Brooke in a statement.

"It may be asked why I, a person who is to die (of leukemia), should be so desperately anxious to prove my innocence before my death.

"It is in order that when the history of this period comes to be written I should not be regarded as a paid spy who betrayed the country which gave him and his family hospitality at the time of his greatest need."

Mr. Brooke was unmoved. He ordered Soblen's deportation as soon as practicable. Reservations were made for Soblen and a British police surgeon on a Pan American Boeing 707 leaving London for New York September 6. But the overdose of barbiturates sent him to the hospital instead, and ultimately to his death.